

# Model Path to the Middle East

by LAURIE CREASY



Madalyn Goss



UNLIKE MANY Bloomsburg University students who study abroad each year, Madalyn Goss and Robert Nixon found their pathway not through an academic department but through participation in a campus organization. Their first impressions of the countries they visited focused on the differences in culture and climate. By the end of their stays, they had also discovered similarities.

“Even though I expected the difference in women’s clothing,” Goss says of her trip to Saudi Arabia, “it was still startling.”

The sheer amount of diversity and history fascinated Nixon, who visited

Lebanon. “There’s a Phoenician port, a Maronite church, and an Ottoman government building just down the street from Roman bathhouses,” he says of Beirut, the capital city.

Nixon attributes his interest in the Middle East to the events of Sept. 11, 2001, and his search for answers to the complex question of why someone would fly a jetliner into the World Trade Center. For Goss, the Middle East was a dream destination for travel.

Both wanted to experience the region firsthand, but were stymied by logistics, including the expense. The closest they

could come was enrolling in Arabic language classes at BU. There they met Nawal Bonomo, assistant to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, who introduced them to the Model Arab League (MAL) and encouraged both students to seek out opportunities to study abroad. As a result, Goss, a junior from Mifflintown majoring in political science with a minor in Middle East studies, toured Saudi Arabia for 10 days during the 2013-2014 winter break. Nixon, a senior from Millville majoring in history and French with a minor in Middle East studies, went to Lebanon during summer 2012.





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– Robert Nixon '14

Robert Nixon

To read about their experiences, visit [bloomuexplore.blogspot.com](http://bloomuexplore.blogspot.com).

"Learning does not end when the class is over," says Bonomo, who advises MAL. "When I began teaching Arabic in 2008, I looked for ways to engage students outside the classroom. Model Arab League was the perfect venue to introduce students to the various aspects of the Arab world."

The MAL, sponsored by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, brings together college and high-school students to participate in discussion and decisions about the countries in the Middle East. The students take on the personas of Arab League delegates, representing nations

ranging from Iraq in the eastern Arabian peninsula to Morocco in northern Africa. They discuss important issues, then research and write position papers as actual delegates would do. They also write and pass resolutions – a formal, regimented procedure.

"There are so many myths and misconceptions about the Arab world," says Bonomo, a native of Lebanon. "It is refreshing to see how students' views are affected when they represent a country and speak in that country's voice."

Goss and Nixon confronted those myths and misconceptions during their visits to

the Middle East.

Goss believes Americans' biggest misconception about the Middle East is that the region's citizens hate Americans. Her experience proved otherwise. "Everywhere we went, we'd get coffee and dates," she says of her tour with nine other American students. "One storekeeper even gave us a bag of dates. They want to talk to you, want to get to know you."

"I think the biggest misconception Americans have is this tendency to see everything as a monolith, that the Middle East is a 'thing,'" Nixon adds. "There are so many countries, languages and

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PHOTOS: ERIC FOSTER

Nawal Bonomo

cultures. It's not all one place." But in the most important ways, it's not that different from America. "It is people who are trying to get a job, make money, maybe go out in their free time. That makes it more real."

### History and politics in Lebanon

Nixon found the layers of history amazing, especially on a visit to Byblos, which dates to 10,000 B.C. and is believed to be the oldest, continuously inhabited city in the world. "There's a Neolithic village buried under a Phoenician ruin buried under a Greek ruin buried under a Roman ruin and offset from Persian ruins," he recalls.

Beirut, the largest city in Lebanon, still bears many of the scars of war, he says, and some of the city's new development uses parts of the ruins, rather than demolishing them and starting anew.

His visit included trips to the border between Israel and Lebanon, some of the rural areas of the country, and some time in the north. "Things are different when

you head up into the mountains," he says. "There are picturesque villages built on the side of mountains, like something out of a storybook. The Bekaa Valley, just 19 miles east of Beirut, was much more arid, and there were people herding goats, but the cities on the coast could have been any city in America."

Lebanon's stress on political balance fascinated Nixon. Parliament's 128 members – 64 each from Christian and Muslim denominations – serve four-year terms. "Parliament has a certain number of seats for each religion, and you must say what religion you are when you vote," he adds.

### Women in Saudi Arabia

During her visit to Saudi Arabia, Goss wore the traditional *hijab*, a head covering, and the *abaya*, the black overdress with snaps down the front. The dress itself was hot, she recalls, but the place where the *hijab* and the *abaya* met was "really, really hot." Sometimes she wore the traditional veil, which leaves only a woman's eyes

uncovered. "I kind of liked the veil," she says. "You feel mysterious and protected because they can't see your face. Would I like to wear it the rest of my life? No!"

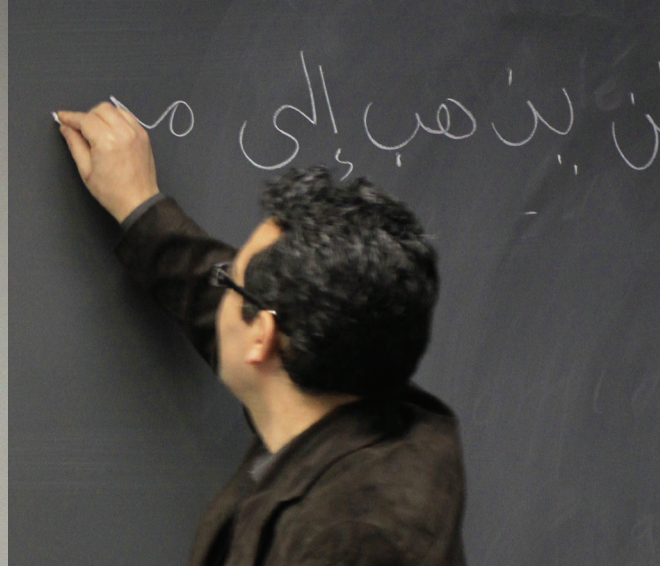
Interested in women's rights around the globe, Goss was happy to get an inside perspective. She observed that Saudi Arabian women seem to be most concerned with their careers and being equal in the business and political sector, and that the younger generation is determined to close the gender gap.

Only when her group stopped at Al Baik, a fast-food restaurant, did she find being female inconvenient. With four registers on the men's side of the store and only one on the women's side, Goss and the other women in her group waited 40 minutes for their food. She found the separation issues to be more between single men and families than between men and women.





Yahya Laayouni



## Back in the U.S.

Nixon's trip was sponsored by the Lebanese Renaissance Foundation, which works to rebuild Lebanon's cultural prestige, bring democracy back to government, and help nongovernmental organizations and private businesses thrive. Goss's trip was paid for by the Saudi government. In return for the trip, she is asked to share her experiences in articles, blogs or presentations. Both credit their participation in the Model Arab League for giving them the chance to travel to the Middle East.

"The fact that I have this experience on my resume is going to say that I'm committed to working in the Middle East and northern Africa," Goss says. "It's also going to say I've had a cultural experience other than my own – some basic knowledge of what to expect." •

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## Why Arabic?

ROBERT NIXON AND MADALYN GOSS are among a growing number of students worldwide enrolled in Arabic classes.

"Arabic represents more than 300 million speakers," says Yahya Laayouni, assistant professor of Arabic and French, "and is the language of the second largest religion in the world, Islam. Arabic is also the fifth most spoken language in the world."

The United States government considers it a "critical language." It's a hot language on the job market, too. "There are career opportunities that Arabic opens up in a variety of fields," Laayouni says, "in business, political science, computer forensics, international relations, translation and many others. There is actually a shortage of Americans who speak Arabic overseas."

The language has a reputation of being difficult to learn, but students shouldn't let that stop them, Laayouni says. "Since Arabic uses a completely different alphabet and its system of writing is based on connecting letters, students consider that as a barrier. In fact, it is not."

Students spend at least four weeks learning how to write, how to recognize letters and how to connect them. "The challenge is at the level of speaking," Laayouni says, "but with practice it becomes much easier."

Both Goss and Nixon used basic Arabic while on their trips. What does that mean to native speakers?

"They generally appreciate that people in other countries are learning their language and culture," Laayouni says. "Saying *marhaba* ("hi") or *kaifa l'hal* ("how are you?") means a lot to them. It also makes a good impression, helps establish good relationships and makes people more willing to speak to you." •